

Information for Bunny Caregivers - Rabbit Behaviour

SENSORY CAPACITIES

By Carolina James

Having many predators, wild rabbits are always alert to danger and use their sense organs to detect approaching enemies. Although she lives in the safety of your home, your house bunny remains very vigilant and will react instantly to an unfamiliar sound, smell or sudden movement. Learning about sensory capacities will help you to understand your rabbit's behaviour and the way in which she sees the world.

Hearing

Your rabbit has a very sharp sense of hearing; she can perk up her ears (unless she is a lop) and move them in all directions. The large surface area allows the ears to pick up more sound waves than smaller ears can. This is why a bunny can hear the faintest noise from any direction and can identify its source immediately. In addition each ear can move independently of the other, enabling the bunny to listen in two directions at once.

Rabbits' ears are very sensitive to sound. If a bunny hears a loud or sudden noise she may bolt or flatten herself on the floor in a freezing posture. So it is best to avoid exposing your rabbit to loud noises (a blaring TV, noisy children, barking dogs, fireworks and so on).

Sight

The large eyes placed on the sides of the head offer the rabbit a panoramic view of approximately 360 degrees. A bunny can see all the way around and above her head, and notice a friend or foe approaching from any direction.

A rabbit's eyes are adapted for viewing objects at a distance, like those of other animals that depend on flight for survival. A sudden, faraway movement is quickly noticed by the rabbit. However, rabbits can't see well close-up because they have a blind spot in front of their noses. This is why your rabbit often runs between your feet and is unable to see a piece of food that's right in front of her nose.

Like other crepuscular animals, rabbits see better than us in dim light, probably having just black and white vision. When caring for a shy rabbit, or one who isn't in her usual surroundings, it is important to move slowly and quietly. Otherwise she could react by bolting and running into walls and furniture.

Smell

Rabbits have a very keen sense of smell and their nostrils are always twitching to sniff out the faintest odours. Their movement exposes the sensory pads which detect smells and transmit the information to the brain. The nose usually twitches at the rate of 20-120 times per minute but this may cease completely when a bunny is very relaxed. The twitching of the nostrils is complemented by the split upper lip. Its exposed moist surface behaves in a similar way to the wet nose of a dog, increasing the bunny's ability to detect odours.

Smell is a major form of communication among rabbits. Each animal produces special smells (pheromones) in the urine and from scent glands under the chin and tail.

Pheromones inform other rabbits about an individual's age, sex, social and reproductive status. When two rabbits are introduced for the first time they spend a lot of time sniffing each other to get to know one another and decide who is the more dominant. Through her sensitive nose a bunny can immediately detect the presence of an unfamiliar animal in her territory (such as a new rabbit or the neighbour's cat). Rabbits also identify people by their individual smell.

Having a sensitive nose, rabbits dislike the smell of strong cleaning agents, cigarettes, perfume and some foods. If a rabbit smells a heavy fragrance she may even attack the person wearing it. You should only use mild detergents (from the vet or pet shop) when cleaning your rabbit's possessions and environment.

Touch

Rabbits use their whiskers and eyebrows to feel objects near the face and to find their way in the dark. Being as long as the body is wide, the whiskers help a bunny to judge her distance from an object (such as your furniture or a wall). The entire body surface is very sensitive to the touch, so stroking your rabbit when she is nervous or

frightened will have a very soothing effect.

Body contact, such as the feeling of being in a burrow-like space (perhaps a tunnel or a cardboard box), and the presence of an animal friend are very reassuring for a rabbit. When you stroke your bunny, take care not to pull her whiskers or touch them unnecessarily.

Taste

The rabbit's tongue has about 8,000 taste buds, compared to 48,000 in the dog. This means that although rabbits can experience different tastes and develop definite food preferences, they don't necessarily recognise which plants are poisonous. When feeding twigs and wild plants, it is up to you to identify toxic varieties and keep them out of your bunny's reach.

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